

Tone and Style

What is Tone?

Tone is the expression of the author's attitude. Like the tone of voice in a character, the tone of a story may communicate amusement, anger, affection, sorrow, or contempt. However, tone is more than just how a character says something. When instructors ask, "What is the tone of the story?" they usually mean, "What attitude does the author take toward a theme or a subject?"

Determining Tone:

Words alone do not determine tone. The reader must also look at the following elements to infer the tone of a literary story:

1. Details
2. Characters
3. Events
4. Situations
5. Words

Complexity of Tone:

The tone of a story may convey more than one attitude; it may convey several at once. For example, in "Gimpel the Fool," the readers have mixed feelings toward Gimpel and his foolishness. They are amused that Gimpel is so easily deceived, they are sympathetic to his excessive innocence, and they admire his unwavering faith in God and fellow man.

What is Style?

Style refers to the individual traits or characteristics of a piece of writing. It is a writer's particular way of writing words that readers recognize. A distinctive style sets a literary work apart from other works. The style in which a story is written is one of the clearest indications of the tone of a story.

For example, Ernest Hemingway's style is like listening to a conversation. He is a master of swift, terse dialogue, often using understatement to imply greater depths of feeling than he puts into words. The following excerpt from "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is a good example of his style:

"In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference."

-More on back-

William Faulkner, on the other hand, uses more explicit and showy language. He often writes of seemingly ordinary matters in an emphatic, impassioned way. The following excerpt from "Barn Burning" is a good example of his style:

"His father did not answer and now he heard again that stiff foot striking the hollow portico with that wooden and clocklike deliberation that outrageous overstatement of the weight it carried. The rug, hunched, not flung (the boy could tell that even in the darkness) from his father's shoulder struck the angle of wall and floor with a sound unbelievably loud, thunderous, then the foot again, unhurried and enormous...."

Determining Style:

When looking at the language a writer uses to express his or her attitude, look at traits, such as the length and complexity of the sentences and diction, i.e., the choice of words. Also involved in style is any regular use of imagery, patterns of sound, or figures of speech.

Remember:

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